

Relationship of Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma and New England Friends

October 14, 2026

In 2023, NEYM's [Quakers and Indian Boarding Schools Research Group](#) (QIBS) began researching the role of New England Friends in the Federal Boarding Schools of the late 19th century. We learned, to our great dismay, that New England Quakers were deeply involved in the establishment of schools in the central and northeastern part of Indian Territory - now Oklahoma. QIBS completed its final report to the Yearly Meeting in 2024 and submitted a [formal report](#) to the United States Department of the Interior in December 2024, in the final days of the Biden Administration.

In 2024, QIBS and the Indigenous Relations Resource Group (IRRG) were charged by NEYM "to open communications with the Indigenous Peoples of Ottawa and Pottawatomie Counties of Oklahoma (what had been the Quapaw and Sac and Fox Agencies) to explore opening communications towards offering a collective apology and asking what first steps might be acceptable to them."

Outreach to the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma

Beginning in 2023, under a leading supported by Beacon Hill Monthly Meeting, Gordon Bugbee and Mary Zwirner sent letters to the thirteen Tribes and Bands most directly affected by NEYM's participation in the federal assimilation project.

Those Tribes and Bands are the Ottawa, Peoria, Miami, Quapaw, Modoc, Shawnee, Eastern Shawnee, and Seneca Cayuga in Ottawa County, Oklahoma (formerly the Quapaw Indian Agency), and the Iowa, Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, Citizen Potawatomi, and Absentee Shawnee in Lincoln and Pottawatomie Counties, also in Oklahoma (formerly the Sac and Fox Indian Agency). Those letters describe their purpose and plans to travel in the relevant areas and offer assurances of our intention to be respectful.

They have made three trips to Oklahoma starting in 2024, accompanied in 2024 & 2026 by Suzanna Schell, a member of their support and accountability committee and clerk of IRRG.

Generally, Tribes and Bands have not responded to these letters. But openings have occurred and relationships have been established with the Modoc, Wyandotte and Eastern Shawnee. They plan to return in 2027.

The Iowa Tribe did follow up in March of 2025. Unfortunately Gordon and Mary had already returned from Oklahoma, but this gave Gordon an opportunity to talk further with one of the Ioway Elders.

The invitation to meet with the Iowa Tribe Business Council (their governing body) came in response to the earlier letter to the Tribe, followed by a phone call in March 2025. The March 6, 2026 meeting with the Tribal Chairman, Jacob Keyes, and five Ioway Elders was deeply moving.

Mary, Suzanna, and Gordon spoke very briefly about what had brought them to Oklahoma. Mostly they listened as, one by one, the Elders and Chairman shared their reactions to their apology and their several visits to the Tribes and Bands of Oklahoma, and described the ways in which the Iowa Tribe is engaged in moving forward. Elders spoke about the persistent effects of the traumas of the distant and recent past.

Several spoke about the losses that came from attempts to suppress their language and culture. In that context, Chairman Keyes described restoration of the Iowa language as a priority for them.



The loway Elders also seemed moved by the conversation and by the gifts we shared with them and asked that a picture be taken to record the event.

New England Friends provided funds and sent teachers for the Iowa children beginning in 1888. In accordance with the policy and practice in the government-funded or sponsored schools, teachers forbade the speaking of Indigenous languages and other forms of cultural expression and sought to reduce or eliminate familial and Tribal influences.

The last heritage language speakers of the southern loway language walked on 2 decades ago. A small number of second language learners, mostly elderly members of the Tribe, preserve what they can of the language. Leadership of the Tribe are committed to reclaiming the language and fostering its wide usage among the loway people.

History of NEYM and the loway

In 1888, New England Friends helped fund the creation of a day school for loway children. The mission included a four-room house and a school that was housed in a modified tent. The intention was to build another building that could be used for classes and religious services. At the time there were 16 students.

The first teacher was Elizabeth Test from Richmond, Indiana. Having worked for a number of years at the Seneca Indian School in Wyandotte, Elizabeth was familiar to New England Quakers. When Elizabeth took ill, she was replaced briefly by Mary Sherman of Providence. Not long after Elizabeth returned, she recognized a leading to set up a school for Kickapoo children. Lina B. Lunt of Durham Monthly Meeting took her place. In 1890, the loway in Indian Territory accepted allotment. New land, 20 miles north and east of the Tribe's former location, was assigned to members of the Tribe.

The mission moved with them, abandoning the Bear Creek site for land on the Cimarron River. Schooling was disrupted, attendance fell, and funding became inconsistent. In 1893 efforts to maintain a school were ended and Lina Lunt left to assist Elizabeth Test. New England Yearly Meeting and its Women's Foreign Missionary Society shifted their support to focus on the Kickapoo mission and its teachers.

History of the Iowa Tribe

The Iowa Nation was probably Indigenous to the Great Lakes area and part of the Winnebago Nation. At some point some bands moved southward, where they separated again. The bands which stayed closest to the Mississippi River became the Iowa; the remainder became the Otoe and Missouri.

The Iowa, or loway, lived for the majority of its recorded history in what is now the state of Iowa. The Iowas call themselves the Baxoje (Bah-Kho-Je) which means grey snow.

The Iowa Tribe relocated many times during its history. For many years they maintained a village near Council Bluffs, Iowa, abandoning it because of aggression by the Sioux and a desire to locate closer to the French traders. Thereafter, the Iowa lived primarily near the Des Moines River in the Chariton/Grand River Basin.

With the encroachment of white settlers into western lands, the Iowa Tribe ceded their lands in 1824 and were given two years in which to vacate. Additional lands were ceded in 1836 and 1838, and the Tribe was removed to an area near the Kansas-Nebraska border. The Iowas, whose native lands encompassed an area of the Missouri and

Mississippi River Valleys in what is presently Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska, now found themselves with a strip of land ten miles wide and twenty miles long. Subsequent treaties would find this land even further reduced.

The dissatisfaction with their conditions and treatment resulted in a number of Iowa tribal members leaving the Kansas-Nebraska reserve in 1878 and moving to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). In 1883 an Iowa reservation was created there, but Iowas who wished to remain on the land in the north were allowed to do so. Today the two are recognized as separate entities. The Northern Iowa are headquartered in White Cloud, Kansas, while the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma has offices in Perkins, Oklahoma. adapted from <https://iowanation.org/about-us/>

[Regarding the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska see <https://iowatribeofkansasandnebraska.com/about-us/>]

Note 1: Gordon was also a member of the Quakers and Indian Boarding Schools Research Group that carried out the research on NEYM's role in the 19th century Federal assimilation project.